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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

WILLIAM E. BACON, STAFF DIRECTOR

September 21, 1979

TO: Members of the Foreign Relations Committee

FROM: Bill Barnds
Graeme Bannerman
Diane Smith

SUBJECT: Developments in Afghanistan and Possible
Increased Soviet Intervention

We would like to draw your attention to the recent events in Afghanistan. The removal by force of President Taraki and the assumption of power by Prime Minister Amin. have started in train events which may force Moscow into choosing between allowing a neighboring Marxist regime to be overthrown or substantially increasing its commitment to the regime. We believe direct Soviet actions will be viewed by the U.S. press as another major setback for U.S. interests in the region as well as a further indication of Soviet ambitions in the Third World as a whole.

Developments in Afghanistan

The coup against Afghan President Taraki by Prime Minister Amin in mid-September is the latest and most dramatic purge within the ranks of the pro-Soviet Marxist regime, which seized power in the country in April 1978. Internal disputes within the regime, an attempt to impose radical Marxist policies on a traditional Islamic country, and close and open identification with the Soviet Union despite historic Afghan antagonisms toward Russia have combined to weaken and isolate the regime from the overwhelming majority of the Afghan people. Widespread but uncoordinated insurgencies have grown over the past year in all parts of the country. Extensive Soviet material support, together with several thousand military "advisors", have enabled the regime to retain a tenuous hold on power. The government's position continues to erode, however.

During its early months, the regime moved to undermine traditional ruling groups in Afghanistan -- the mullahs, merchants, tribal leaders, and those urban middle class elements not sympathetic to revolutionary change. The brutality soon alienated wider elements of society. Purges of the armed forces and police, and their penetration by cadres of the ruling People's Democratic Party, combined with its close ties with the Soviet Union, enabled the regime to maintain its hold.

Nevertheless, the regime is currently facing a growing rebellion, which now is evident in 23 of 25 provinces. The insurgency has grown in scope and ferocity despite steadily increasing Soviet support. Defections of army units ranging up to battalion size have occurred periodically. The government's control extends beyond urban areas only when it sends a major column, usually with air support. At times the rebels have even won temporary control of provincial centers, and a short-lived uprising at a big military base within Kabul occurred recently.

The effect of the rebellion has been limited, however, because:

- most insurgent attacks are essentially short-lived raids after which the attackers fade back into the hills; and,
- there is virtually no coordination between insurgent groups, nor any accepted political organization guiding them.

The regime's problems increased in mid-September when Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, a hard-bitten Marxist, dismissed the last two army members of the cabinet and overthrew President Taraki. Whether these events represented a simple Amin grab for power or a defensive reaction on his part to maneuvers by Taraki, the regime has been further weakened. The regime's control of the armed forces may have eroded, although no hard evidence exists on this point.

The Soviet Dilemma

The Soviet Union appears to have been surprised, and probably also somewhat dismayed, by Amin's seizure of regime control last weekend. Brezhnev had only just that week embraced President Taraki in Moscow. The terse Soviet public recognition of Amin's accession seems to represent an initial

minimum signal of continuing support for the Afghan "revolution" while Moscow assesses the full implications of the more radicalized situation and Soviet stakes in it.

At this point, the Soviets are probably still concerned about possible serious backlash against Amin in the Afghan Army. The somewhat increased readiness of one Soviet airborne division in a Soviet Military District adjacent to Afghanistan could reflect either concern about an unstable situation and a contingency need to protect/evacuate 5-6000 Soviet officials and dependents or an unfolding coherent plan to intervene massively to support Amin. We believe it at this time is the former.

Over the next several weeks the Soviets face some serious military and political dilemmas about the level and kind of support. Pushing Moscow toward deeper military involvement will be:

- the fulfillment of Russian desires present since czarist times to expand Moscow's influence into Afghanistan;
- the hope of a disciplined Marxist state on its southern border able to become an active pro-Soviet factor in the regional politics of Pakistan, India and Iran;
- the prospect of an important firebreak against perceived Chinese encirclement;
- a perceived need to refute U.S. attempts to enforce linkage of the global U.S.-Soviet bilateral relationship to Soviet attempts to shift regional balances, especially in regions bordering on the USSR itself; and,
- the creeping military logic that just a little more involvement will carry the day against the insurgencies.

Influencing Moscow to be very cautious about deeper involvement will be:

- mistrust of Amin's judgment and durability, and Soviet ability to have sufficient tactical influence to protect adequately its investment;
- the possibility of becoming bogged down in a Soviet Vietnam situation, with attendant loss of international prestige as well as direct costs;

-- awareness of stirring U.S. assertiveness about its international interests, the possibility of American counteraction elsewhere, and the effect of a massive, visible Soviet intervention in Afghanistan perhaps tipping the balance against SALT II ratification.

Perceived time urgency will be an important factor in this Soviet risk-gain calculation. If it appears that Amin can last until winter brings opportunity for regrouping, retraining, and renewed Soviet political persuasion, Moscow would probably prefer to hedge its bets with only incremental increases in military support and adopting a profile not dramatically higher than over the last year and a half. Over time, the danger for the Soviet Union would be whether Moscow can accurately assess its deepening involvement and its implications.

If, on the other hand, a strong case is put to the Soviet leadership that only a greatly increased scale of Soviet intervention this fall will salvage the Afghan revolution, then there will be a difficult decision on the wisdom of putting heavy stakes on Amin.